

Helena María Viramontes: social and political perspectives of a Chicana writer

Entrevista

Helena María Viramontes is one of the most socially and politically conscious writers of today and these concerns permeate her work. Viramontes is also clearly a feminist writer, joining ranks with other Third World women writers. She recognizes the common ground of the colonized experience of many Third World countries as well as those marginalized groups in the United States and the often silenced struggles of many women against the dominating patriarchy. In this manner, we can see some of Viramontes' stories, such as "The Moths" or "Growing," revolving around young girls reaching womanhood and discovering the paternal restrictions imposed upon them due to their sex. Other women are forced to resist the demands or violence placed on them by their husbands such as in "The Broken Web," "Birthday" or "The Long Reconciliation." Her women, both young and old, are characters who rebel, but are fraught with contradictory blends of weaknesses and strengths, fighting against their unfulfilled potential, their selfless lives of giving to others, tensions in the domestic sphere and performing apparently small, but heroic acts of resistance. Viramontes often chooses the myth of *La Llorona* as a link to a web of the international community of women who frequently can do no more than wail, cry for those children they have lost to wars, whether abroad or in the barrios, to immigration and deportation, to drugs, to abortion, to discrimination and humiliation. In stories such as "Snapshots" or "The Jumping Bean" she often contrasts the ideals of the middle-class woman with the impossibil-

ity of the working class woman, who only asks for day to day survival, and maybe, a “toilet” of her own.

But at the same time, many of her stories center on women fighting and resisting against other social injustices such as issues of immigration, racism, undocumented workers, class distinctions, and ecological concerns. The struggle of these women is not only their own, but that of their class or community. In her first novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, adolescent Estrella wakes to the issues of pesticides and their effects on the downtrodden migrant workers. “The Cariboo Café” centers on displaced persons, a blurring of national and geographical borders leaving only the marginalized people who suffer the police anti-immigrant racism. Helena María Viramontes continues in her recent work with similar issues. In her second novel, currently being reviewed for publication, *Their Dogs Came With Them*, the Chicano Movement and social injustices remain a prime concern. She is also working on a collection of short stories, *Paris Rats in East L.A.*, based on the life of Modesta Avila, a California woman who fought to defend her property rights against railroad encroachment in the 1890s. Viramontes, personally and through her characters, identifies with all the downtrodden people of the world, in particular with women and has committed her energies to endowing them with a voice so they will be heard.

Helena María Viramontes is currently an Associate Professor in the Creative Writing program of the English Department of Cornell University. She has previously taught at Antioch College and California State and participated in numerous writing programs and workshops, among them the Sundance Institute under the direction of Gabriel García Márquez, the Breadloaf Conference and many Latino workshops. She obtained her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of California, Irvine and was awarded the John Dos Passos Literary Award in 1996. She devotes much of her time to community projects, scholarly work, having co-edited a number of books, acting as literary editor for several journals and projects and lecturing and reading from her work all over the United States and Europe. Many of her stories and essays on writing have been reprinted repeatedly in diverse anthologies, among which are several from distinguished publishing houses such as Norton, Longman, St. Martin’s, Oxford, Gale, Simon & Shuster, Harper Collins, Harcourt Brace and Houghton Mifflin.

Her creative books are *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985, 1995) and *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) other than the two currently being reviewed. Her scholarly books, in addition to articles published in journals, are *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature*, (1987, 1996) and *Chicana (W)rites: On Word and Film*, both co-edited with María Herrera-Sobek (1996). The interview was held on March 30, 1998, in Alcalá de Henares, Spain.

Carmen Flys-Junquera
Universidad de Alcalá

CARMEN FLYS: We are at the University of Alcalá in the Residence Hall of the 17th century Colegio San Ildefonso. Helena, firstly, I would like to thank you for giving me the time for this interview. We were talking about your family and childhood.

HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES: Yes. I was telling you about my growing up the first five years of my life speaking nothing but Spanish, and then going into the educational school system and finding out that Spanish was completely unacceptable there. Because it was unacceptable, it was almost as if anything that was attached to the language was a negative thing. So, I can understand to a certain extent why children grow up feeling that they want to hide their parents or the language or whatever, in order to be accepted into the larger dominant culture.

CF: Yes, I remember having moments of that. Only the early moments, but, because it was socially acceptable for my parents, as language professors, to speak Spanish, there was no negative connotation to it. They always took cultural pride in their origins and were able to teach me that. I was very fortunate in that aspect. I can imagine how it must be very different, particularly with children whose parents were migrant workers and who resisted western culturalization.

HELENA: Well, you know, I think that basically California would serve as a beacon for the U.S. in terms of politics. Californians are always in the forefront, sort of predicting the future in terms of Affirmative Action and bilingualism. It is also the case that by the year 2000, presumably over 50 per cent of the population would be Spanish speaking. I think that the fact of their being a linguistic competition going on there, causes a reactionary attitude. In one word, people are just fighting over language, because there are so many Spanish speakers that they are afraid that they are going to flood in, take over and all that.

CF: What a sad situation.

HELENA: Oh, yes, very much. Tell me about it.

CF: Americans, in general, instead of taking in the wealth of several languages and several cultures are protecting themselves against it.

HELENA: I don't know quite what it is, whether it is racism or what. The institutions that are set up to always be able to differentiate what the other is: they are the ones that permeate this kind of feeling that, "No, no, no, we should be the melting pot. If anything else, you should be more like me rather than being yourself." In any event, I think it's problematic for a number of reasons. Take language for example: here you have a child who has spoken nothing but Spanish going to an educational school system where only English is permitted to be spoken. It is almost torture for the child being told, "No, do not speak that language." There is a powerful negative attitude that forces you to drop your language. But any time you come home, you come home to parents who speak that language. My mother was born in East L.A. herself and went up to the tenth grade, I think. Whereas my father, he came from a large family

and he was the youngest. My grandfather had to cope with supporting all his big family and my father ended up being born in Arizona. My grandfather was working in the mines there and then the family migrated to L.A., so my father actually speaks a lot of Spanish. My father, first of all, has a third grade education. He can't read or write well, but he speaks mostly Spanish and understands a little bit of English. My mother spoke very good English, understood English but preferred to speak in Spanish. So the result of this is first, I get English, nothing but English at school. Then I'd come home and my parents talked to me in Spanish. Since I know they understand English I respond in English. As a result, I can understand Spanish really well, fairly well, I should say, but to speak it is another matter and that's the condition of a lot of Chicanos and Chicanas.

CF: Language is something that is so difficult to acquire and so easy to lose. I've spent long periods of time in both countries using predominantly one of the two languages, and the other gets rusty, no matter how well you spoke it. Then, one also develops one more than the other, especially in different spheres of life.

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HELENA: Oh, absolutely. For me, having had that sort of living with the forces of language and acceptance, it gave me the understanding that I'm not very comfortable in either of them. To go back and to study the language of Spanish would be something very difficult for me because I already have assumed certain barriers that I would have to work over psychologically even to the point of, I mean, even to the point of blocking out very simple words and very simple sentences because of the fact that I know I can't say them correctly. You know what I mean? It's very interesting. María [Herrera-Sobek] and I go back and forth on this because there have been several times that my desire to present something in Spanish has been overwhelming and no matter how much I practice, it's something I cannot do because I freak out. I think it has a lot to do with psychological scars and how this language was basically taken away from you.

CF: True. I can't speak in English to my mother. When I get together with my mother and her husband, I go both languages, sort of translating myself. It's a madhouse. I can't speak Spanish to him although he understands it. There is an emotional barrier.

HELENA: For me there is a lot of that within the family itself. I come from a large family. My eldest brother who is 54-55 communicates in nothing but Spanish. He dropped out of school so he never went through the educational system, so his language is basically Spanish and he only speaks English for survival because he is living in the United States. And then I have my youngest sister who got a degree in bilingual education. She is fluent in Spanish but it was something that she studied to recapture. So there you have both extremes in one family.

CF: Talking about the educational system, I know a lot of the Chicano students have tremendous difficulties with Spanish. While they are fluent orally, their written language, their grammar, is poor. On the one hand, there may be overconfidence but then, on the other, there is also probably some other inner feelings of what they should or shouldn't say and how. Feelings of rejection because their Spanish is probably not standard, at least according to the university language departments. The language courses in the university are not adapted to people who have an oral fluency but not written and, of course, the traditional lesson, "yo soy, tú eres, él es" not only bores them but is irrelevant. They know all that and when you have that type of people with oral fluency but not written, you have to adapt the whole language teaching program and that, of course, is money, effort, desire....

HELENA: Could you imagine that problem for writers? Writers, in comparison to painters who can paint in whatever color or musicians that can play whatever tune and feel the transcendence, but writers? Language is a basic and the thing is that for Chicanos, and I can only speak for myself again, but there is a really profound negotiation that one goes through even when one is thinking Spanish and having to translate it to yourself and write it in English. Now it is funny because I gave a reading a few years ago. I had all sorts of funny reactions. I can look back on that now and see that *Under the Feet of Jesus* has sort of developed an audience of non-Chicano as well as Chicano readers. I have been told, people have told me, that there is too much Spanish, and they lose a lot of it, which I think is absurd because I made a conscious effort to put in some, but there isn't much. I would say that there isn't enough of it. I got questions like "Why did I write this in English?" "Why did I write this in Spanish?" And it's funny because, you know, I argue about the relevance of Spanish to be truthful to my characters. I really, really have to be truthful to how they speak. It's my responsibility to try to capture it in an honest and open way. But I also think that kind of dismissal of there being too much Spanish is, well, bullshit, because I have read Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*. He's written a trilogy on the borderlands: a young man in the 1930s crossing the border into Mexico. Very, very interesting writer. In that particular novel, there's a lot of Spanish dialogue. Not one critic or reviewer complained about this, yet I use Spanish words and I'm told that there is too much Spanish. You know, you think, just wait a minute. Why can a white male writer use it? Perhaps because this white male has the privilege of saying that it can be an aesthetic, a sort of ambience. But me, it is because I'm either targeting an audience or because I'm trying to keep something secretive. It doesn't make any sense to me. It just doesn't

make any sense. Those questions have made me think, but I push them aside and then, I am asked why I don't write in Spanish. I say, "My God, I've never learned the language!"

CF: I asked Rodolfo Anaya something similar and he answered that he can speak Spanish but he'd never learned it to the degree to express himself, to write in it. He'd start a lecture or conversation in Spanish but then go into English.

HELENA: And then I think, why write in a language that even the Spanish professors would say is corrupt, invalid, not good enough Spanish, I mean. Do you know what I mean? It's become a very difficult question for me, but I was trained in English. Like I said, I'm not comfortable in English but I think that's why I became a writer: to try to explore the language and get the most out of it with the feelings that I have. I mean, Cherrie Moraga writes about relearning the Spanish of the first years of her life, which is one thing, but living and feeling in Spanish is another and you can't really recapture that unless you recapture the language.

CF: I know. My home language, my childhood and my emotional life is in Spanish. I can't be emotional in English—when I try, I sound like a movie to myself. It doesn't come spontaneously.

HELENA: That is really, really something. Sandra [Cisneros] had this article a couple of months back about the death of her father where she talks about how her father used to call her *nenita* and he would talk to her in Spanish and whenever she hears the *nenita* she always thinks of her father and she always thinks of the language and she could never love enough in the language of English. It would have to be in Spanish because that's the way she was taught.

CF: I know. I've never been able to say mom, mother, mommy. It's *Mamá*. It's always *Mamá*.

HELENA: In my house my father used to call me Helenita bonita. My mother used to call me Helen. So you know, it was always the way I was labeled, even within a household. Now the novel that I'm writing is very interesting to me because I'm writing this novel that deals with the '60s and the '70s and there is very little Spanish in it and that has bothered me for a long time because I've been very very close to the characters and then I realized that this was the time. This was the '60s, '70s and no wonder, there was a big thrust in the Chicano movement. In the late '60s or '70s, you had the Civil Rights that was trying to recapture the language and cultural identity, because we had not been allowed to have it. It's funny because I had already subconsciously absorbed that and I'm writing about this particular time, but there is no Spanish. So even then, you know, for me, it's become a real political question. Now I have to find out how to deal with this issue so that it becomes a major question in the novel.

CF: It comes to mind right now, in this novel you are writing, perhaps there are no children or no older people. Are you dealing with young adult characters?

HELENA: Well, most of them.

CF: Because in *Under the Feet of Jesus* the Spanish appears when there is interaction between young children or older persons; Alejo calls Estrella, "Star". He doesn't use Estrella because adolescents, I think, want to integrate themselves into the mainstream and be like anyone else.

HELENA: I think that's what a lot of it is.

CF: There are so many emotional factors in using one language over the other. Different spheres of life may be in different languages. Reflecting that would probably give a very mixed text. It might be a problem maybe for publishing but if it is true to the characters....

HELENA: Absolutely. It's a difficult issue, but dealing with such a text would be very hard to negotiate and I'm not even talking about publishing because when you are writing you are not thinking about the audience. What you are doing is thinking about translating the images of the emotions into words. That's what you are most concerned about. But I think it would be a hard thing to negotiate. That's why writing is so exciting, because you get these words and then you poke at them, sort of sculpting, you pull and push and poke and you get to a redefinition and it is exciting when you discover another aspect of that particular word. You know, all of a sudden your vocabulary is just another way for entering into the world of your imagination.

CF: That's exciting. The image you use of sculpting, fighting with words, how to translate feelings into images, into words.

HELENA: It is. I was at the Sundance Institute, that's the Robert Redford film institute, and I was invited to go and participate in a storytelling with García Márquez and it was incredible. In fact it helped me so much. When I came back and I actually did write a thirty page script that did get produced by the American Film Institute. But that training of looking at things cinematically and also looking at every sense of a visual exterior to reflect the interior of a character, it really got me into *Under the Feet of Jesus*. That kind of training. That's why *Under the Feet of Jesus* was a joy to write, because the characters were all so very much there. They are all very generous and then I had this incredible love backdrop in which I could use this kind of script training because that's the first thing that they teach you. It's basic to understand silent movies. I mean, it's not so much of the dialogue as it is the visual images. You really have to pull your mind and your imagination to come up with any images that would reflect what you want reflected in terms of the characters' sentiment. Let me tell you, that's a hard thing to do, that's a very hard thing to do, but very creative.

CF: Going off on another angle, I would like to ask you about your different identities. Which are the most prominent? Does it change?... as a mother, Chicana, a writer? How would you identify yourself primarily?

HELENA: Well, I suppose it's the positioning I am in right now. Right now, I'm sitting here and I've shifted gears to thinking about language and being a writer and yet before I came to the interview I had been doing some laundry and had to put some clothes into the dryer. It can be very, very difficult. In fact, I find it hilarious, at times. When I go to my house I have to shift gears from being a professor, from being a writer, to being a mother. When I go home, if people call me—there was a woman who called me because she was organizing a conference between Mexico and the United States, and she invited me. I was washing dishes when she called me and I said, “*profesora*, pardon me, but let me dry my hands, let me walk into my office and let me sit behind my desk.” She started laughing at me, because that's the only way that I can concentrate on the conversation because this is not going to be a “can you pick up my daughter?” So that's what I have to do. I have to walk into my office, close the door, sit down at my desk and then say OK. I have to shift gears. It's very, very difficult to negotiate. At the same time, being a mother is, of course, the most challenging thing you can be, but I can't use that as an excuse for not getting my work done because women have always been able to at some point or another. In fact, what is incredible about *mujeres* is the fact that they can do all that. Whether they have to or not, whether it is by choice or not is another matter, but the fact they can do all this. If I can never find my space because the kids are running around and I'm obsessed with what is going on with their lives and everything else, that is not my excuse for not getting my work done. So it might be difficult for them to realize that mom is a writer and in fact, to a certain extent, they do pay that price because in many ways I'm vague in their lives. I have to be really careful, especially after writing sessions; I literally have to tell them: “make sure that when you are talking to me that I'm facing you, that I'm looking at you and that you're registering in my face.” Because they get so angry. They turn

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around and when I'm in the middle of another world, it takes a while for me to come out of the world that I'm in, you know, walking around. If they ask permission to whatever, they ask me and I'm not listening. I can rarely hear their voices so I do ask them to please shake me, look at my face, recognize that I'm listening, because even if I'm looking at them I might not be in their world. They laugh at that, they do laugh at that but you know, it's the reality of having a mother as a writer. So my identities, they have to shift like anybody else's. I never forget the identity as a Chicana, it is almost a given. Whether I'm a Chicana mother, whether I'm a Chicana lover, whether I'm a Chicana writer, it is a given. It's almost like—I would not change that part of my

reality. That is what has given me inspiration. Like the color of my skin. I would never change that. It's not a question of identity. It is always there.

CF: When did you begin writing and why?

HELENA: OK. There are a couple of things. I actually began writing after college. It was after I graduated from Immaculate Heart College in '71. It was the height of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. I had been a little involved in the United Farm Workers through the school that I was attending. I was passionate about literature and poetry. I think that at one point or another every university student entertains the thought of being a poet. But, you know, it is wonderful that we all have this desire, and I don't know what it is; whether it is literature or whether it is an engagement in that period of our life. We don't know what it is but at one point or another we all try poetry—and so I did. I took a creative writing class in college, and it just didn't work. I had such high respect for poets that whenever I looked at my own work, I didn't think much of it and so I decided to never try poetry again. I had been reading a lot of Black women writers, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, of course, and then I was reading a lot of Latin Americans in translation, and of course, you know, [García] Márquez and Juan Rulfo. When I read *Pedro Páramo* it just brought the world over. I just thought. After I read it, after I studied it, after I put all the pieces of this incredible novel together, I realized, "Ah, I would love to do something like that. I would love to create this world and I would love to be passionate with these characters and engage the reader and make it a masterpiece." If the reader works hard enough all the pieces would come together and get the gift of insight. So I thought, OK. After college I did write a short story and that was called "Requiem for the Poor," and, I tried being Rulfo, stream of consciousness and all these other elements. It was a terrible story, but I submitted it to a contest held at Cal State L.A. where I was going for my graduate studies and it won first place. I said OK, let me try my hands at this and I decided to write my second and my third short story. I started reading out to people; actually I felt comfortable reading to people. When people started saying "ah! It reminds me of my father. It reminds me of my sister. It reminds me of me." Then, I realized that I wasn't just writing my stories but in fact I was writing about a community of people. When that realization came, that's when I said, you know what, I have to write the best that I can because these are the people that I love the most and that's where my commitment to doing the best that I could came; writing is the best that I can do and asking nothing short of that of myself. That's when I made that decision. Writing chose me or I chose writing for the rest of my life.

CF: And your source of inspiration? That's something that fascinates me. The characters come to you, the story comes to you. Where do you get an image?

HELENA: I think all writers have different inspirations and I think, too, that every particular project of that writer has different inspirations. I think if there are nine stories

in the collection from *The Moths*, there are nine different inspirations for what I was doing. What intrigued me for *Under the Feet of Jesus* was, I was reading Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's *Las Paletitas de Guayaba* and she was writing about how these young girls were not allowed to go into a barn. Well, that immediately raised my attention because every time something is prohibited because of gender, you know, primarily *mujeres*, I begin to think why, why is that? I always think the opposition is because there is something that they don't want us to know or something they want to keep away from us. That's how I started *Under the Feet of Jesus*, with the question of a young girl not being able to go into a barn and the desire of her wanting to go in. That's how I started the novel. I think the underlining is a real sense of trying to write about social injustices, a real sense of outrage. When I'm so incredibly angry at how people have been treated, the racism and sexism, it becomes almost a surreal thing. It's so absurd when I think about how horribly people are treated.

CF: So you do feel the role of a writer or storyteller is being committed and trying to find a, could we call it, creative set of strategies to re-describe the world.

HELENA: I have no objections to that term "creative strategies" because I fully believe that writers play a prominent role in society, and they have to take that responsibility more seriously. I was reading an interview in the *Paris Review* by the Israeli writer, Amos Oz. He says that in the U.S. writers are treated like entertainers while in Israel writers and literary texts are taken *so* seriously there is not even a word that's translatable in Hebrew for the word "fiction." Fiction is a lie and that isn't what the narration is: everything but lies. In fact, it is truer than even facts. He says the role of the writer there, is of a visionary, a prophet, somebody who sees things clearly. To a certain extent I believe that, too. Writers have a responsibility. We have the responsibility to remind others that people like us are real. I mean, the whole idea of the violence that's happening in the L.A. community, for example. I don't want to capture just the violence, but I truly want to make my readers feel it, to remind them that a part of why that violence is happening is because the reader has to engage more and care more about what's going on. So that's my responsibility, that's my commitment to re-writing the world. I always say I'd like to earn a honest night's sleep. If there is not something that I can do to help, write whatever small piece to get some type of love or compassion to remind people about how important it is to be compassionate, then I have no right to sleep at night.

CF: You were speaking right now of the violence and... I'm shifting gears again. One thing that has really impressed me of your work is that even in terrible poverty or disagreeable situations, there is such lyricism, such beauty. I was wondering, you must be an optimist at heart or a romantic that you can see beauty despite the terrible situation of the characters and it's wonderful.

HELENA: As a writer, to put pen to paper you have to hope, hope against all odds, because if you did not, you would not put that pen to paper. I consider myself a social

realist. In fact, I've been compared to the social realists of the 1930s, writers like Theodore Dreiser; I received the John Dos Pasos prize for literature. *Under the Feet of Jesus*, of course, is very much compared to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. But I do feel that I'm a realist. I try to be very, very truthful of the type of reality that we live in, but I also understand that there is a basic romantic underlining in us all and I

“(...) because it is almost as if I'm writing about my childhood in L.A, which is in the '60s. I am writing about a time that no longer exists now. I have to pull places out of my imagination two times.”

bring that out in my characters. I also believe that people who read this, I'm asking for their humanity, too; to balance out the two, so we can right some wrong. You have to hope against all odds. For example in the “Cariboo Café,” which I consider my most political piece—because in that piece I was truly so outraged—I really felt I brought the readers into the story, and I wanted the readers to press their face against the window and see what was going on and say “It's your fault if you do not do something now,” to indict the reader, to move them to some kind of political action. I would cry when I was writing it. I mean, I would have nightmares about the stories. That story and “The Moths,” are the two that have been the most anthologized. The “Cariboo Café” is one I really feel I did accomplish something because so many people have been compelled to write about it. But that was one of those stories where I was totally outraged, even at the very end. At the very end, even though there is this incredible, incredible scene where—it still affects me and every time I talk about it, I start crying.

CF: Then, let's change the tack. Do you have a routine or a ritual for writing? Do you write in spurts or...?

HELENA: I try to be very methodical. When I wrote *Under the Feet of Jesus*, I was getting up between 4 and 7 in the morning, Monday through Friday, and I called myself a unionized writer. On Saturday and Sunday I didn't work at all. I didn't write. But I was able to do that. With this other novel it's been a lot more difficult because I'm working at Cornell, because I'm older now. With *Under the Feet of Jesus* I was in bed at nine. I had absolutely no social life. The relationship that I had with Eloy sort of suffered. Now it's, as I said, more difficult. I try to write on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but I feel that's not nearly enough time. What is saving me from total despair in terms of not being able to dedicate myself full force like I did with my first novel is the fact that it is the status of women right now. Most of us have to do a million and one

things and still have to complete some type of work, so again not using that as an excuse of “ah! I simply just don’t think I have time.” I can’t get up early, I’m working a full time job. I just try to stick to working on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I’m hoping this summer to really dedicate myself fully, but that’s the only way. To be a disciplined writer I think is the only way to tap into your subconscious. You can’t do it in spurts, it would be impossible. For poets it is much easier because they work with smaller pieces of work. You can sort of work for a short time everyday, but truly a novelist has to be absorbed into his world completely, totally. It just takes longer to get to that place, so you have to be very methodical about it.

CF: What about your sense of place? Sense of place is something that interests me, particularly your roots, your sense of belonging. You were living in L.A. Now you are living in Ithaca: very different landscapes. What is your sense of place? Is it important?

HELENA: Oh, very important. I think for me place is defined by where home is. You never know what home is until you leave it and then you realize that the corner vegetable man is no longer there. The sense of being rooted in childhood experiences; even now, going back to L.A., for example, leaving Ithaca and going back to L.A.; it is not the same type of L.A. that I remember as a child. And for me it makes that more profound because it is almost as if I’m writing about my childhood in L.A, which is in the ‘60s. I am writing about a time that no longer exists now. I have to pull places out of my imagination two times. One, because I’m not there; I’m in Ithaca writing about L.A and twice, because I’m no longer a child and things have moved. But I think I’m beginning to understand. Elías Miguel Muñóz, a Cuban-American writer who was with me at the Sundance Institute, told me: “Helena, you have such a sense of community at home.” He was a Cuban, having left Cuba when he was 16. They moved to Spain first and then he eventually moved to Hawthorne, California where there was a small community of Cubans at the time. He said, “you have a place that you can call your own, I have none.” When he told me that, not so much the words but his expression, his silence, the devastation I saw on his face; that’s when I realized how important these things you take for granted are, these rooms, these walls. Again, this whole idea of going to the corner store and getting the vegetables from the man that you’ve seen every day for ten years and you just know that the next day he’s going to be there selling vegetables; that’s no longer there. When that happens you realize these are the components that make you feel very secure in a place, that make you feel that this place is a certainty of yours. When there is that certainty, it is home. The aspect of not having a home, for example, in terms of the migrant life is another aspect because when you are moving so much it is almost like grating against your soul. Your soul is in migration and in *Under the Feet of Jesus* that was one of the things that I was concerned with. Several years ago at UCLA I taught in the MENTE summer program. The program actually hired high school kids to come study at UCLA. They received a stipend rather than work in fields, which is something that they always did. They attended different classes like music. They had an English creative writing class with me and others. Well, graduations were always really hard. There was a psycholo-

gist who was working with the students and who said that the students literally fainted. The students were a combination of boys and girls. There was no shame; they were openly sobbing, fainting; there was a really high, high level of emotions. I turned around to the psychologist and said "Why do you think that is?" And he told me. He said it was because they had never had a chance to make friends. Could you imagine migrant life where you just never have a chance to know a person long enough to bond with? Your family becomes a real central unit of survival and everybody else is migratory just like yourself. How does this type of reality grate against the soul, where you can no longer bond with another person other than your immediate circle? Those are the types of things that I began to think about when I was writing *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

CF: Before you mentioned the idea of community, and you have said you have a very strong sense of community. Do you think the Chicano or Latino worldview, I am thinking of community values, among others, is different from mainstream America or not? This is something that Anaya speaks of, that the Chicano worldview is different.

HELENA: It is, it is. I think it is. But I also think in terms of region. The differences among the Chicanos in terms of region. A Tejano is very different from California, and very much different from Colorado. People are very different in Arizona, these kind of things. Definitely, I think there are differences in worldview, again this whole idea of family. You have such a dominant culture that may seem so foreign, so alien, and to a certain extent so unfriendly. Or if they are friendly, it's a friendliness out of commodity. So your family becomes this very tight knit group that you leave to go into other things; even going to school, for example, can be a difficult thing. Although more and more *mujeres* have been able to do that. I think in terms of Latino, Latinoization of the U.S. I think it is very interesting. The fact of the matter is that we are different but we see that in one family. We see our definition of success for example. Our values in many ways are very different. And then, there are people like Eloy and I. Eloy grew up as a migrant farm worker from the Rio Grande Valley. He got a Ph.D. at UT, Austin. I grew up in urban, versus rural, East L.A, graduated and then went on to a private Catholic College. Then, we got together—we both had very, very working class values, were very Chicano nationalists, in terms of our pride and our history and consciousness. We are raising two kids. Now these two children are being raised in Ithaca, very much away from the community, very much away from the extended family. We have to develop rituals by which they at least know some part, intellectually, about themselves. It's a very difficult thing because now they are middle class kids. So how does one negotiate the values that are sort of middle class, traditional U.S. together with working class, hard-core working class Chicano values? They are going to have to go through their own negotiation. But one that I think that Eloy and I are aware of and need to express in a positive way, that it's OK. This is what we both have to do. It is a scary thing. At the same time it's interesting to hear the things that come out of my children's mouths.

CF: Sometimes a real shock, too.

HELENA: Tell me about it.

CF: Do you think there is a specific Chicano canon? Should there be a special place for Chicano literature? Or should it be part of the mainstream canon?

HELENA: Well, the more and more I think about it—what I do at Cornell is really try to encourage comparative readings. We didn't do that, in terms of this country, and our canons are not that clashing. The fact of the matter is that, out of arrogance of the dominant culture, you have other canons that have been ignored or repressed or simply not given the valid attention that they should be given. Now, only in the last 20 or 30 years there are people like María Herrera-Sobek, for example, who really have worked incredibly hard to legitimize our work, and I say that in a very guarded sense, the work as being a comparative one; I think that is essential. It really is an essential thing, so I think it definitely is a canon, but it belongs in a comparative way to the U.S. American Studies canon and also to a certain extent under the Latin American canon. That is, a respectable, equal part of that kind of comparative reading, not a bastardized cousin of the work and that's the way sometimes we are seen.

CF: I'm just going to ask about who your characters are. I see the men you portray are very hardworking, yet very reluctant to speak of their feelings, very harsh, almost violent. I don't mean to say they don't love their children, but often they find refuge in alcohol. The mothers, I see a lot of very ill mothers, worked out. Young boys seem to be somewhat missing and the young girls are either the little girl who is very observant, doesn't say much yet, but catches everything, or the adolescent girl who is taking on a very strong action or decision and really getting her grips on things. Is this the Chicano reality? Or why have you chosen those characterizations?

HELENA: I wrote an essay several years ago called "Nopalitos, the Making of Fiction," and it dealt basically with how I became a writer and I talked about the females in our house. I mean, it was primarily a female household. I had five sisters and then my mother. If we could handle a broom by the age of five, we were told to sweep, very hard-working. The privilege of the male counterparts—my brothers, my three brothers—was very dominant. That is where I grew up in my feminism. I remember once standing with this huge broom. I remember it being huge as a young girl and looking at it as my brothers went to go play. My thoughts were, "not fair." And I think that I have always been for whatever kind of injustice; if it wasn't fair, I would say it. We were a centered household of females that used to subvert the very, very dominant patriarchal presence of my father to such a point that my father, for me, was the symbol of male privilege, the symbol of Catholicism, because he was also a very, very dominant Catholic and so we all had to go to church. That's what "The Moths" is all about, being forced to do what you didn't want to. When I wrote that "The Nopalitos" essay, I was beginning to become aware of the fact that I really enjoyed all the females about the household and seeing that very simply as the best that anybody could offer.

And then, looking at the male aspects, and absolutely looking at the worst that anyone could offer. Two very, very vague extremes.

CF: And the stereotypes? The dominant cultural stereotypes. The Chicano is seen as lazy. Your men are not lazy.

HELENA: That's one of those stereotypes that really was informed by absolute and total racism. I think we are very hard working people. I mean, very, very hardworking. That was one of the things that I did have to respect about my father. My father was an incredibly hard working man. He was a laborer with a third grade education and had to support eleven people. That is a big thing. There was a long time in my writing that I simply either ignored the male figures, as for example in the collection of "The Moths," or I just couldn't deal with them in a very honest way. In fact, when the collection first came out I was called to that. Somebody raised their hand and said, "Do you realize you don't have one redemptive male character in all of your stories?" I remember I was younger than I am now, and I said, "I don't know any male redemptive characters." And everybody reacted. But of course, that made me think. Why is it? Why is it? I really went home and thought about it. Why is that? I remember a story that Sandra Cisneros told me once when they asked her for an example, I guess it was in *The House on Mango Street*. She said, "I feel like when somebody slams a door on your hand." You don't think, "Oh, why did you slam that door? You shouldn't be doing that. That wasn't a very nice thing to do." You scream and that was sort of my scream. It was really my outrage, my anger, this feeling of being a part of this household that extended this dominance. I left the household when I was 17. That's when I moved out and I realized that the larger society was not very different. You had a very, very dominant patriarchal system that was very, very male oriented and male privileged; and you had women always trying to subvert the system, at least the women that I knew, and in whatever ways they could subvert it, that, or either change it or live with it in a real way.

CF: Could Estrella be seen as a Virgen de Guadalupe figure? At the end there is a mention of her stepping on a serpent, stars above her head which remind me of the cloak....

HELENA: Oh, that's very interesting. I have no idea. I have no idea.

CF: Could she be subverting or replacing Jesus—the figure of Jesus being broken?

HELENA: Certainly, I am calling, or at least Estrella is calling for a new spirituality. Certainly, where you have some of the Catholicism coming in and being a mystical sense of faith and imagination, you know, giving that power to the human heart. I don't know.

CF: It reminded me of the poster and even the cover of the book you did with María [Herrera-Sobek], with that image of Guadalupe by Yolanda López.

HELENA: A great poster. I love that series. Yeah, could be, could be. I mean, I tell you honestly that was not my ending of the story. In fact, it was Estrella's ending. My

ending is very different and I kept re-writing it and re-writing it. It wasn't working until finally I accepted the fact that maybe it was just not the right ending. The fact of the matter is that Estrella was just too powerful. By that time, she was just an incredibly powerful figure to me and my endings were inappropriate. That's why I sort of left it open in a celebration of having a capacity, the empowerment to know. She can just about do anything she wants to do. You know, that is such a powerful thing, as you said. Even in terms of the history of having had a difficult experience, of having to go through an ordeal and coming out of it saying, you can do it.

CF: Helena, you've been very patient and I know your family is waiting. Thank you, thank you very much.

HELENA: You are very welcome. And now both of us, back to shifting gears.